When The Mind Rests, The Body Heals

The Powerful Effects of Meditation

In a world of increasing distractions and elevated levels of stress, our bodies often respond in protest, becoming vulnerable to illness, bad tempers, and a lack of focus. But there is a tonic — a tool you can use anywhere, anytime, with no special equipment.

Meditation is a practice that has been used for centuries but has come into greater regard in the United States over the past 50 years. Meditation doesn't require awkward sitting positions or visualizations or mantras, but can be as easy as breathing in and breathing out.

Two prominent pioneers of meditation

In 1968, Herbert Benson, MD, a cardiologist and Director Emeritus of the Benson-Henry Institute at Harvard Medical School, was asked by a group of meditators to study the effects of meditation on the human body. Although reluctant, Benson agreed, discovering numerous health benefits from those who regularly practiced meditation. On a separate but parallel quest, an MIT-trained molecular biologist, Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center who started meditating in 1966, began to notice that people who were getting better from physical illnesses. He observed that meditators were experiencing fewer headaches, improved healing of ulcers, better sleep and improvement with back pain. The meditators also experienced an overall sense of well-being.

Over the years, studies have shown the benefits of meditation, including how it decreases stress and remedies the effects of stress. Stressful situations often create what is called a feeling of "fight or flight." This physiological and psychological effect is one of the ways our bodies respond to physical threats to our well-being. Our blood rushes to the main muscle groups for quick action and our body is on high alert. Our heart rate surges and our hormones become elevated, ready to fight or flee. Once the "attack" is over and we're safe, our bodies return to normal.

Stress can keep our bodies in a constant or varying state of fight or flight, on high alert, elevating the hormone cortisol. Long term, the effects of raised cortisol levels can cause elevated blood pressure and a rapid heart rate which can be damaging to the body.

Stress can also trigger unhealthy behaviors like alcohol and drug abuse, overeating, insomnia, and trouble coping with everyday life.

Mindful Meditation

There are many ways to meditate. Mindfulness meditation was developed by Kabat-Zinn. According to Beth Mulligan, PA-C, Physician's Assistant and a long-time instructor of mindfulness meditation and stress reduction workshops, mindfulness means paying attention on purpose and without judgment. It means having an overall awareness of your surroundings to bring you into the present moment and away from daily worries and distractions. An awareness of your breathing is

the next step, as you take deep, slow and deliberate breaths. When you are focused on your breathing, you are present in that moment. And when you are present and mindful, your body and your mind can take a real break.

“The most important reason to meditate is to allow yourself to become fully alive, to have the opportunity to connect with people and make decisions, and to live the life you want to live with meaning and purpose,” says Mulligan. “We want to stay connected to who we really are and what we value. If we don’t slow down, and if we’re pulled in too many directions, we can lose that connection.”

“Even when we’re doing things we consider restful, like watching television, listening to music or playing computer games, we aren’t resting our minds,” reminds Mulligan. “It’s important to give our minds, and subsequently our bodies, a true rest. Mindfulness meditation is an effective way to rest our minds, no matter where we are — even for just five or ten minutes a day.” Mulligan continues, “The more we meditate, the better we are at using meditation to calm down or focus during stressful situations.”

The health benefits of mindfulness meditation can be profound — a decrease in blood pressure and heart rate, a stronger immune system, greater focus and a general sense of well-being.

Mindfulness meditation is taught at more than 300 medical centers and universities including Harvard, Stanford, the University of California, San Francisco, Columbia University, and the University of California, Los Angeles. It is also used by the United States Department of Defense, NASA, Boeing, Google and General Mills.

Eisenhower offers classes in mindfulness meditation and stress reduction. For more information, contact the Eisenhower Healthy Living Resource Center at 760-568-1234, or visit emc.org/calendar.

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